

**BOOK REVIEW**

**IMPROVING THE PAST, DOWNGRADING THE FUTURE?**

**RAMCHANDRA GUHA**

Published by Picador India, London: Pan Macmillan

*Review by*

**ASHIMA GOYAL**

**Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai 400 065**

Guha's wonderful ability to collect and select material from a large number of original documents and sources has enabled him to let voices from the past speak, and to make us listen. The period covered is under-archived and therefore a first shot at putting it together is a valuable labour of love.

Although the book is huge my comments will be brief: I will start with his assessment of political personalities; the organizing factor or idea of India used, make a brief excursion to understand what the historian sees himself as doing, before coming back to that idea of India.

The book has entertaining and sometimes acerbic anecdotes. For example he tells us that a vain Mountbatten had official histories written depicting himself as holding the peace amidst squabbling schoolchildren. Guha has his heroes, but on the whole the assessment is balanced. Nehru justly comes out as heroic. He admires the systems and institutions Nehru set up, his belief in democracy, his large-hearted secular stance. He even admires Nehru as a historian—pointing to his perceptive observation on the escalation of tension between China and India that it was the first time two new nations faced each other with no intermediary. But he also brings out Nehru's errors such as over China and records the compromises and decay of the later years. Although Nehru turned the country towards socialism and built large public sector enterprises giving the government heights it was unable to command effectively, the IITs he set up have helped the country today. The fault is more his daughter's for not reversing the stance in the face of obvious failures, when much of the developing world was doing so.

The even assessment is there for other leaders also—Indira Gandhi may not have respected institutions but she was decisive; Rajeev Gandhi may have damaged his secular credentials with the Shah Bano case, but he started valuable economic reforms.

As a good writer Guha knows the value of drama. His organizing factor is drawn from Khilnani's (1997) analysis of why the Indian experiment with democracy is unique, in his book "Ideas of India". The point counter-point Guha keeps returning to is the survival doubts for the fledging democracy first from foreigners and then our own doubts (although today the world seems to be celebrating India). He brings out our achievements we underestimate; sheer survival; the absorption of the princely states to create the India of today; adult franchise and the gamble of the first elections given the largely illiterate and "unwashed masses" (as a foreign

commentator noted) who voted. In ancient Athens where democracy began, Aristotle feared giving the vote to farmers and artisans since would bring in what he called their “base concerns”.

We are reminded of many forgotten but interesting facts from our recent past. The diversity of groups and demands led to numerous agitations—the democracy was vociferous about rights from the beginning. Some of the problems we worry about today had a long genesis. Nehru was already decrying the decay in the quality of bureaucrats and observing that Indian politicians would take any position to combine, regardless of its merit. But bureaucrats handled the first elections well – they could perform if given a clear task then as today.

The value of the Gandhi-Nehru brand of secularism is brought out as an opposite reaction to the formation of a Pakistan based on religion; the other reaction was that of the Hindu right to what they saw as an unrequited pampering of minorities. But the secular State’s distancing from the majority religion, even while it cosseted minorities, which Guha supports, had the unfortunate consequence of muting the public voice of the dominant tolerant, inclusive stream of Hinduism.

The leaders wanted to take a larger, and large-hearted, stand against parochial local desires. Even so, some local, even parochial demands, that the leaders initially resisted, had a wisdom—e.g. allowing local languages, and language-based States, contributed to the survival of the nation, unlike Sri Lanka, where the imposition of one language helped give birth to the Tamil Tigers, or Pakistan, whose eastern arm became Bangladesh—named after the language it was denied.

Guha’s position seems to be that history as the past is inviolate. That is the reason he moves to “historically informed journalism” and takes up four issues in order to record events of the last couple of decades. But as he himself points out, events are a thicket, one has to be selective—implying events cannot be seen independent of the viewer. He seems to hold Ranke’s 1830s influential view that a historian’s role is “simply to show how it really was (Carr 1961:8)” for the past and Carr’s opposite view that facts of history are simply what the historian has selected, for the more recent past. But he admits being selective throughout, although more for the recent period.

Yet he criticized Sen (2005) for selectivity, suggesting that not being a qualified historian, he had misused history by picking out practices in the past that he wanted to see today. Sen wrote in a rejoinder to Guha’s (2005) review of Sen’s *Argumentative Indian* that Guha attributes to Sen the BJP-like position that “the distant past must guide how one acts in the present (Sen 2006: 4877)”; to defend such a position it is necessary to present a full picture of the past. But Sen’s position correctly is to use the past together with critical reason according to our current position or priorities; so pointing out that a practice existed in the past may make it easier to adopt it today, but many other factors affect the outcome and its desirability.

Guha in discussing India, as Sen was doing in *Argumentative Indian*, is selective, yet rarely uses critical reason, preferring, on the whole to say what happened not why it happened. Therefore it is doubly important that he avoids biases by reporting different viewpoints.

Guha sees India now as a populist not a constitutional democracy, but thinks the founding fathers set in sufficient systems over a long enough period for democracy to survive, despite the 70 odd amendments made to the Constitution in the post independence period.

He records the growing populism, pointing out that the DMK was the first to give direct sops to backward castes in the late 60s, and how quickly the infection spread—Mrs. Gandhi's 1971 slogan of *garibi hatao*; major price increases for farmers in the late 1970s after the Janata Government, which was dominated by Other Backward Caste farmers came to power. Needless to say, a large fraction of the handouts went into the pockets of various functionaries. Guha writes politicians now no longer live for politics but live off it.

Politicians began pandering to "vote banks", as the Congress lost its dominance and local parties came up. The term "vote banks" and the argument that elections were increasing the importance of caste came from MN Srinivas (1962). It has shaped how we think of the election process. Politicians and the public are influenced by academic ideas; therefore academics have a responsibility not to be caught in past habits of thought and to be sensitive to change. Guha does not refer at all to Dipankar Gupta's body of work (see, e.g. Gupta, 2000) that shows that many considerations apart from caste influence electoral outcomes, and castes themselves are dynamic and changing. While some local identities acquire new life in a global world, others become fluid, with migration, urbanization and changing job profiles. Multiple identities of the modern world prevent anyone being specially privileged.

Guha pits populists versus reformers in his description of economic reforms, but neglects to make the crucial distinction between long versus short-term populism. He neglects to ask why the latter was chosen over the former. Why was the provision of better education and health services not followed as populism? He neglects the influence of economic stagnation, and the effect of a closed economy on choices made. Being suspicious, divisive, local may not be the only way to win elections. As growing economic opportunity gives the electorate more to gain from them, the delivery of public services is becoming crucial.

To the extent controls were responsible for corruption and dysfunctional systems, incentives can improve, but institutional change is required and institutions are sticky. Special but effective programs will continue to be required for the disadvantaged.

Guha quotes an old teacher of his as saying that Indians are a nation of grievance collectors. In describing the economic reforms his bibliography does not have a single reference to a business newspaper—this is a serious neglect of the vibrant, confident voice of India—unfortunately grievance collectors dominate his references. Focusing too much on one view of the past means discounting the possibility that the future may be different. He ends by saying India will survive, but thinks there are too many impediments for it to really thrive.

The large national dailies form a large percentage of Guha's sources; he notes that India's history is daily worked out in its newspapers. But regional and local language sources are all neglected. Therefore "a history" may have been more appropriate in the title.

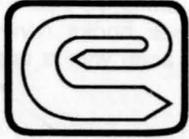
Finally, the book will be remembered by how much it contributes to and shapes our ideas of India.

India needs a larger view today. Important questions the book raises are: will prosperity alone be able to induce this or is a Nehru required again? Can processes, people and institutions reach a level of maturity making them less dependent on leaders?

**References**

- Carr, E.H., 1961, *What is History?* London: Macmillan. Reprinted London: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Guha, R., 2005, "Arguments with Sen: Arguments about India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XL, No. 47, 4420-25.
- Gupta, D., 2000, *Interrogating Caste: Understanding hierarchy and difference in Indian Society*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India.
- Khilnani S., 1997, *The Idea of India*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Sen, A.K., 2006, "Our Past and Our Present", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLI, No. 47, 4877-86, November 25.
- Sen, A.K., 2005, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*, London and New Delhi: Penguin and New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Srinivas, M.N., 1962, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House.





# EXIM BANK

EXPORT-IMPORT BANK OF INDIA

## EXIM BANK INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH ANNUAL (IEDRA) AWARD 2008

In

### International Economics, Trade & Development and Related Financing

#### THE AWARD

The Award was instituted by Exim Bank in 1989, with the aim of promoting serious research in the areas of International Economics, Trade & Development and Related Financing being carried out by Indian nationals, at Universities and Academic Institutions in India and abroad. The Award comprises a sum of Indian Rupees One Hundred Thousand and a Citation.

#### THE ENTRY

Research Work in International Economics, Trade & Development and Related Financing (either awarded a Doctorate or accepted for award of a Doctorate), from a university or an equivalent academic institution in India or abroad is a prerequisite for eligibility for the Award. Exim Bank will accept, as entries, those theses by which Doctorates were obtained or accepted for award of a Doctorate from January 1, 2004 to September 30, 2008.

**Last date for submitting entries is September 30, 2008.**

Entry forms available from: Research and Planning Group  
Export-Import Bank of India  
Centre One Building, Floor 21, World Trade Centre Complex,  
Cuffe Parade, Mumbai-400 005.

Phone: 022-2217 2822 Fax: 022-2218 1134

Email: [cag@eximbankindia.in](mailto:cag@eximbankindia.in)

Website: [www.eximbankindia.in](http://www.eximbankindia.in)

**Book Review:**

The Journal carries a book review section. Publishers of books and monographs on Quantitative Economics, Econometrics, Statistics and Operations Research who are interested in getting their books reviewed, should send – title of the book, author name and a brief summary to: mythili@igidr.ac.in with a copy to mohan@igidr.ac.in

**Advertisement:**

For advertisements pertaining to academic matters, please contact Dr. D.M. Nachane, Managing Editor, for details.

**Computer Algorithms**

We propose to introduce a section on **Computer Algorithms** in which computer programmes/sub-routines on advanced statistical or mathematical algorithms with potential for econometric applications will be published. All submission relating to algorithms must be submitted with a clear title, relevant references, and a complete solution to Dr. G. Mythili, Assistant Managing Editor, by email (mythili@igidr.ac.in) or by post to The Journal of Quantitative Economics, C/o. Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Gen. A.K. Vaidya Marg, Goregaon (East), Mumbai – 400 065.

**In case of Change of Address:**

All the life members of the Indian Econometric Society are requested to send their address in the following format so as to enable us send the JQE issues without any delay. Please send your detailed address to Mr. T.S. Mahesh Mohan (Email: mohan@igidr.ac.in) The Journal of Quantitative Economics, C/o. Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Gen. A.K. Vaidya Marg, Goregaon (East), Mumbai – 400 065.

Name : \_\_\_\_\_

Life Membership No. : \_\_\_\_\_

Address : \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Tel. No. : \_\_\_\_\_

Email : \_\_\_\_\_

# **45<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE INDIAN ECONOMETRIC SOCIETY (TIES)**

## **ANNOUNCEMENT AND CALL FOR PAPERS**

The 45<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Indian Econometric Society is scheduled to be held at Gauhati University, Gauhati (Assam) from 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2009. All those who are interested in submitting papers for the Conference should send the softcopy of the full paper and the abstract (300 words) to Dr K Shanmugan, Convener, Programme Committee (e-mail: [maaties09@gmail.com](mailto:maaties09@gmail.com)) and one copy each to the President and Secretary of the society. More information can be obtained at [www.tiesindia.net](http://www.tiesindia.net).

The last date for submission of papers is 7<sup>th</sup> November. Communication about the acceptance of papers will be conveyed to the authors in the second week of November 2008.

Members are requested to communicate change of address, if any, to the Secretary, TIES, at the earliest.

**Dr. N. R. Bhanumurthy**  
Secretary, (TIES)  
Institute of Economic Growth  
University Enclave  
Delhi University Campus  
Delhi 110 007  
Phone: 91-9810794738  
E-Mail: [nrbmurthy@gmail.com](mailto:nrbmurthy@gmail.com)

**Prof Mihir Rakshit**  
President (TIES) & Director  
Monetary Research Project  
ICRA Limited, FMC Fortuna,  
A10 & 11, 3rd Floor, 234/3A, AJC Bose Road  
Kolkatta 700 020  
Ph: 91-033-2287-6617/0728/8839  
E-Mail : [proj\\_monfin@hotmail.com](mailto:proj_monfin@hotmail.com)